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Of the twenty-nine poems contained in this collection, most were written within the last ten months. They are not arranged in any chronological or thematic order, although perhaps some semblance of idea and theme can be particularized within the various poems. Basically, I would wish each poem to stand alone in its expression.

EATEN ALIVE

by

James Bardon

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
1973

Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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November 27, 1973

Date of Examination

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some of these poems (some in inferior versions) have or will appear in the following magazines: Comment, Coraddi, Graffiti, Greensboro Review, Gulfstream, Kansas Quarterly, and the National Poetry Press. One of the poems in this collection was anthologized in Pegasus.

My many thanks to Fred Chappell for his time and assistance.

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Introduction

any black people would you  
mother of the last great inventor's  
note and probably about

I.

as illegible. Here comes another people  
would stand at this place in public square  
and a few days before the war  
has not. Will you please

what the little the streets and the  
a pin-a button that says "Support Orphan's Home"  
and this is what I want to say  
from the president's daughter. And who can blame  
the man suffering from good intentions? We all know  
washed in blood that there are to great  
from back to front of the institution of hard work  
a dry pants and try to get home on time.

Just right now I was thinking how nice it is  
to be here, your smiling my chin like  
a coffee cup while looking into the black white  
pages of my eyes before they shut on the  
paper and that beautiful clearness  
my eye I opened.

I.

II.

III.



## Introductions

Hell-o strange world you  
mother of the last great inventor's  
note pad and probably about  
as illegible. Here comes another myopic  
season sliding in safely with its pants down,  
a few noses being busted each day & a few  
people buried for life. You say  
what the hell? and cruise the streets wearing  
a pin-on button that says "Support Orphan's Lib"  
when all you really want is a tight lay  
from the preacher's daughter. And who can blame  
the man suffering from good intentions? We all brush  
the teeth of the mouth that feeds us, believe  
in the card-carrying institutions of hand soap  
& dry panties and try to get home on time.  
Just right now I was thinking how nice it is  
to be here, your rubbing my chin like  
a coffee cup while looking into the blank white  
pages of my eyes before they shut on the  
panoramic incisions that have walked into  
my ear & spoken.

Each Morning

As captivating as the public  
smile of a polar bear

I ascend the stratospheres

of bed linens & curtains  
floating across the tangled  
wreckage of your hair

to wade through the  
bathroom, finally, after the  
toothpaste has failed

and listen to a voice pushing  
its fragile guts out  
saying what did you ever

do to deserve this.

The Lifeboat

- to Rodney Jones

I have stolen this poem from you.  
I have taken the last piece of cheese  
from the last piece of bread  
that was for everyone.  
Call the captain if you think it's necessary  
and when he comes to relieve us of  
our maps & his tools begin to slip through  
the wood & finally pry our tacks loose,  
we'll at least know who is to blame.

Promise me when you get there  
you'll tell no one.  
Let your tennis shoes dry out  
naturally & if they walk away  
behind your back,  
try to keep it a secret.

Here. Take this message just in case  
I don't reach shore with you,  
or have to stop for gas.

Tell the other writers there was only  
one stamp between us & if they don't  
believe you, show them your tongue.  
Tell them we couldn't float forever  
because even the smallest strands  
of rope will sink when they've had enough.  
Or you could say we drew straws  
& the one that was left holding  
the heaviest straw  
got to blow in the seashell  
of his choice.

And if they still don't believe you  
give them this note and say  
it washed up in your pockets.

We were sinking

Sir.

Sinking.

Father

My father stood on the  
street corner buying  
every airplane he could

get his hands on. "Hey buddy,  
you got change for a plane?"  
On the week-ends he flew

like a drugged duck, coming  
in low over the kitchen table  
drinking gin

& asking for a re-fuel.  
His head down, palms set  
like saucers against his thigh,

he motioned to his co-pilot  
for a spoon.

Mom rose from the table like

a helium balloon, her head  
down also, being blind  
as a flag pole & feeling

her way into the kitchen  
sink where an ice tray  
would rip apart 20 years

of his gliding & cough up  
like a frozen engine an  
unlicensed ice cube.

of your apartment. The room  
sealing like rotten cork  
that kept dead flat bottled up  
for freshman Science classes.  
Across from me you  
sat, a clay pipe dark  
in the ash  
of the lamp, smoldering in your  
allure like the door knob  
of a shrine.  
Mixing to the occasion, you shuffled  
the dead air between us  
every 2 seconds every 3 years  
or less that I could stand. Here's  
what you said.  
Get lost.

Ex-Girlfriend

Your mouth was two centimeters  
away from a perfect  
smile.

That was on March the  
10th, 1973. It was raining.  
All week long  
rain curled itself into  
the stale pockets  
of your apartment. The room  
smelling like rotten cork  
that kept dead fish bottled up  
for freshmen Science classes.

Across from me you  
sat, a tiny pock mark  
on the sofa  
of the moon, sunken in your  
silence like the door knob  
of a stone.  
Rising to the occasion, you shuffled  
the dead air between us &  
with your tongue dropped 3 years  
of body heat overboard. Here's  
what you said.  
Get lost.

Back Drinking

- to FC

If the bottle has taught me  
any one lesson  
it has taught me  
all moons are the same.  
I have pulled over many nights  
by the side of the road  
to pee & stood  
with a light I knew  
at that very instant  
was welcoming  
the beetle's wife home.  
Was removing the shutters  
from every frog's throat  
that thought even slightly  
about croaking,  
while saying to the washwoman  
who was cleaning the field,  
we are all the same  
and that I should get  
back in my car  
& ride.



Holding Back

By the lake by  
the lake everything takes  
place by the lake  
but I swear some things  
should be left undone, sealed  
in a fruit jar for the  
relatives & notarized for the  
milkman's pick-up of empties.  
A note pinned on the rim  
of the world saying don't  
leave us any as we'll be  
away for the week-end, polishing  
our tentacles for the final  
show down at the Rainbow Hotel  
when the juices in our throats  
are as dry as a river bed  
and the passions between our legs  
no wetter.

## Arrival

I have carried  
my voice  
to you.  
I have opened  
my pockets to a  
stranger, to a small  
body needing others  
like a dark house  
in proof.  
To get there I have come  
by a face  
like bricks  
thrown  
through a window,  
my doors resting  
against yours  
in the  
cold.  
Let me walk in  
the shadows  
are not complaining  
& I have come  
a long way  
just to see you  
again.

Guilt of the  
Flagellant

Perhaps I have been here  
before in another man's voice  
or in a short poem without  
a flashy title, having heard  
the crinkle of cellophane  
cover my see-through failures  
like a sandwich while all I  
wished for was a refrigerator  
crammed full of cold pies & beer.

Perhaps it's the Amazing Guilt Machine  
that followed me home one  
Tuesday night, blocking my turn-around  
jump-shot smile like I was a  
pulverized midget trying to play  
pick-up-sticks with a giraffe.

The time I was coming home  
from your house, drunk & stumbling  
for light, kissing humanity's hemorrhoids

good-night on your front porch  
and seeing my children suffering  
for a life time. Tiny wars

unfolding themselves out the  
bedroom window  
like swollen flags.

Once I led a charge through the  
kitchen doorway, snatching  
scummy dishes off the table

like flies before mother returned  
with a mattress-boy slung across  
her shoulders like an extra

purse. When they closed the  
bedroom door, I could hear  
my father pissing his mind away

in the Blue Nose Bar, trying  
to decipher his graffitic mistakes  
like a drunken scholar.

Now the time comes when  
my parents can bounce  
no higher, when their faces

become lost like assorted  
chocolates in a gift box  
for the blind. Father with his

constipated dreams, his mind  
as blank as the women who beat  
their kids in supermarkets. Mother

blind as a tree stump sitting  
alone on Sunday afternoon, her  
hands two wrinkled paper bags.

Here on the tucked corners  
of my breath, I know now  
why I hid my lunch money

in the 2nd grade & lied  
to Miss Bell about not being  
hungry. Miss Bell I said

I'm afraid to eat with the  
taller people in the 6th grade.  
Miss Bell with the breasts

that parted like  
saggy waves.

Today I've written Santa Claus

a long letter saying poetry  
will get me no where. That poetry  
is the ass-end of a worm

digging backwards its way  
to hell & if the fat man  
brings me those broken toys,

I would without any fanfare,  
crawl up into my armpits  
and laugh or die.

Protocol for the  
Handicapped.

Stop. Don't read any further. To do  
so might jeopardize not only your own  
state of mind but also the chances of your  
grandmother catching a cat the next time  
it rains. I didn't invite  
you, you realize. And your friend  
sitting there with the cornucop pipe,  
did you ask him? What about it friend?  
Besides it's getting late, night is starting

## II.

So far my eggs inside my pants & my  
typewriter is jammed in the barefoot  
sawdust we're all trying to cling to  
when a cold fog grabs us by  
our neck hairs. So button up, tense the  
moon's girl into another glass of beer  
and never mind the hazy-foot conceptions  
of the floor melting below our feet as  
we sit here. Holding on.

Protocol for the  
Handicapped

Stop. Don't read any further. To do  
so might jeopardize not only your own  
state of mind but also the chances of your  
grandmother catching a cab the next time  
it rains. I didn't invite  
you, you realize. And your friend  
sitting there with the corncob pipe,  
did you ask him? What about it friend?  
Besides it's getting late, night is starting  
to lay her eggs inside my pants & my  
typewriter is becoming jammed on the barefoot  
avatars we're all trying to cling to  
when a cold fog grabs us by  
our neck hairs. So button up, tease the  
moon's girl into another glass of brew  
and never mind the honky-tonk conceptions  
of the floor melting below our feet as  
we sit here. Holding on.



### A Warm Knife

Morning. My mother shuffles  
ashes into the bathroom.

My father walks behind, arms

raised like goal posts &  
shouting at the walls. In the  
kitchen I am 7 years old

listening to their shadows  
jammed against the doorway.

He is naked. A totem pole

for a dick, black turf  
of hair bunched between his legs  
supporting his wife.

For a moment I stand up inside  
myself, the door knob resting  
in my hand like a warm knife.

When I turn it my father's figure  
becomes the color of smoke  
slicing into my skin &

as he raises me above the  
 fragments of his face, I can see  
 he is younger now  
 and already dead.

Upstairs, a room of playing  
 cards on a table. A newspaper  
 with its front section  
 spread beneath an  
 electric fan. I see to make you  
 another drink.

Our glasses sweating  
 on the table next to  
 the Queen as I waited  
 for darkness.  
 My neck  
 burning.

June the 9th: morning

All night long

naked in

bed.

The hotel surrounded us: a sleepy

pile of crumpled brick

nestled between two avenues

like a funnel.

Its wooden doors opening like the smile

of a young Turk, door knobs

thrown together to form

an entrance.

Upstairs, a deck of playing

cards on a table. A newspaper

with its funnies section

spread beneath an

electric fan. I rose to make you

another drink.

Our glasses sweating

on the table next to

the Queen as I waited

for darkness.

My cock

burning.

Autumn

Tree leaves

brothers & sisters

tell them

your children

are coming

## Poem for Howard Moss

Emotion cramps into your poems like a small tide.  
Call it the controlled directives of a warmer heart.  
A valved metaphor that may open or close  
Like a ribbed radiator adjusting its steam  
Or a window someone happened to shut against the cold.  
It's probably not even that interesting  
But you would have us think so. You believe some  
Conditions demand our eye, as you would say "the phatic  
Assessment in the understated concern." Poems usually  
Do that sort of thing. As yours tell us  
Of a sea that looms like a necessary  
Agreement between the clouds and land,  
Tossing tiny discrepancies if the wind  
Disturbs it in storm or birds  
Reach out in thinness to their  
Prefaced shadows below.  
While across this believable water  
Someone will wake from his common dream  
To prepare a meal. Being breakfast. Eggs.  
Realizes the sun pouring its simple vision  
Into darker imperatives of speech  
And love falling in and out with neighbors  
Down the street.

## Bleak House

Your eyes this morning  
gave off a feeling like  
little fingers  
trying to touch  
something  
invisible.

The room dark, I  
stumbled on my  
tongue, your  
silence  
like a new shoe  
I couldn't get  
used to.

# Reactionaries

" . . . their progressive programs on Womanhood were cancelled because of protests by parents"

- news item

Because the Catholic mothers of diocese 146 in a district in Pennsylvania realize their daughters know enough already, and because abortions, the pill, first bleeding & twitchy butts are all a matter of instinct or practice, the Girl Scouts will continue to water plants in a Philadelphia train station, and from their hungry perch safe & out of sight, wave the sex starved men off like flies.

To Everette

- on passing out drunk at a party  
given for a visiting poet

The world sometimes seems such a sad place  
Loving itself through you so with the bright  
Precision of your love. That face  
You put on before leaving was a kind  
Reminder, wasn't it? What heights  
You'll finally let yourself fall from, time  
And all your stumbling thoughts cannot  
Imagine. I think it was something  
To let you know there are others out  
There--in the world that is, where even  
The best minds will occasionally stray,  
Washed in their own particular misery  
Like a sour bum soaked day by day  
With the labels of his choosing. I can see  
You at a bar floating in excuses you made  
About how things would change. It was bleak  
Our being there alone and then later  
What you said--about being alone, being afraid  
Of another smelly day breathing the reek  
Of its rising, smeared in your thin afflatus  
Like a picture seen through a glass bathed  
In jelly. You told me things don't connect.  
They just keep running together & together  
Into another insane delight. And there you sat  
On the kitchen floor, drunk, alone as ever.



Across the River into  
the Tracks

President Nixon is sitting down at the piano to play Beethoven on Pennsylvania Avenue. A cab driver cruises below his window and hears what makes Banana Republics go wild. The cab driver is the hero. Wherever he goes in his cab the music stays the same. Each morning he gets confused trying to separate right angles from freshly shaven lawns. At breakfast he crawls inside his billfold so his wife can get dressed. So his kids can scream for Wheaties and call the neighbors by their first name. He rises from the table holding a lunchbox full of wax paper and disappears through the keyhole of a door like smoke. Now his wife appears in a Japanese kimono, tiptoeing through the kitchen wearing stockings from A & P. This is the way marriages are preserved. This is how we keep our bodies from floating off the sides of the earth and why telephone operators stay busy. Now his wife is burying herself behind a station wagon and driving her life to school. The kids will rejoice. The kids are the hero. Wherever they go on foot a chalk board will erase their names. This is a short story recited on a one way street. The cab driver turns on his radio, sticks his hand out the window to make a turn. Streets dark as batshit slide under his wheels.

## Standing Outside

"From within the poem, that's  
where the fire is"

- Stanley Kunitz

There is something I haven't been telling you.  
I've kept my mouth shut. When I open it  
a grey mass of birds rush out, plumping the air  
with their bodies migrating toward a heat which  
doesn't exist. The cold is here, beneath my feet.  
In the center of my room I try to start  
a fire. Bending over the coals, I blow till one  
perpetual cloud of wings rises to the ceiling then  
thumps back to the floor like BB's. It begins  
to rain inside the room. Droppings cover my hands like  
a glove while my fire dies like a misplayed trump card.  
All the doors have become violent, the ashtrays  
have blown away. Now a feather is stuck in the passageway  
of an artery leading to my brain. I can't remember  
if I am alone or was talking to someone else. Am I  
free to smoke? Answer me. You were here just a minute  
ago before the rain soaked my cigarette. I wanted to tell  
you that . . . that I have been imagining all of this.  
You can come out now, I couldn't break a window pane  
with what I had to say & the fire I was building  
in my throat before you came is weight-lifting itself  
into a flame that will kindle my lying even  
further. Believe me.

Without Women

1

Knock knock

who's there?

A face you'll never see.

A girl with her fingernails painted blue.

What is she doing?

Trying to scrape her fingerprints

off her pillow.

It hurts her.

2

Let me see your palm.

I read fortunes

you know.

This line here means a woman

wearing chrome plated slippers

will visit you shortly.

She won't knock on your door

to wake you. She won't

call your name.

And touching her is out of the question.

It hurts you.

3

Now you see her now

you don't.

Now she's standing in your backyard

holding a sign that says

This Way to the Outhouse.

You open the screen door

to get a better look.

Grass blinks wildly from

her knees. Her palms

sprout zinnia after zinnia like

an embalmed sunset.

In a fragrance which is deafening,

her silence could be served

for lunch.

You walk up to her & see your face

among her colors.

She is holding your voice in her hands

& when she opens them

we both break into distance.

## The End of Things

At the end of the hall where  
the tiles run out on each other  
and the bricks form another camp  
from which to operate, a face  
asks by the chair  
"is this it?"

Because we were in the back room  
dealing smiles around a table  
like old mice, someone walked in with  
"that's all boys"  
so we quietly rose.

Looking down at our shoes,  
we knew the way by rote, a slivered  
trail like glass ants led us to the door  
so we calmly walked the hell out.

We also knew this was coming.  
Hiding our nuts like squirrels,  
we waited for darkness.  
We dreamed of black snow  
taking the trees by surprise  
while the long & short of ourselves  
waited without matches.

By the time we reached the back door  
we saw the choir leaving in a cab.

The exit sign had given way &  
the parking lot was full.

We looked at each other and flashed  
a few minor questions before sitting  
on the curb.

We thought there was something else  
to it all,  
we hoped there was  
so we waited.

## III.

Eaten Alive

Billy & Susan  
can play  
the piano  
and both  
are doing well  
away at school  
which is private  
as my wife's  
hidden bathroom  
parts  
my wife in her  
8th month  
with three older ones  
pushed out before  
the car started  
guzzling  
too much gas  
my car that needs  
a new car  
& a new garage  
to match  
the house that  
is falling  
flat ass in  
on my toothless  
head.



## Marriage

Touch a life and it  
touches back. Bang! &  
some big shot walks between your eyes  
for a while, a crape-jacketed poker player  
no doubt, dealing out the cataclysmic numbers  
of the universe like a NASA telephone directory.  
You hold his hand--it's butter baby  
but you hold it like a limp mandrake root and  
begin believing anything the bastard says  
when all he wants is to crawl up your legs forever.  
The parents come, their heads down locked in an  
abortive effort toward prayer, repeating to themselves  
Oh hell! here we go again, I knew it I just knew.  
Father sits on the family crystal minding his  
booze while your mother hand-wrestles the in-laws  
to death with her teathy grin. Then they all  
throw their fist-full of rice down your dress before  
you undress & realize so much for  
one life. Yours. As you were saying.

Poem on my  
Birthday

The sun this morning is a turkey  
squatting in the sun  
as I throw it grain that

has rooted along the veins  
of my left hand.

Outside, the birds are behaving  
like serfs & picking the trees  
clean, picking the scudding  
year off my sleeves.

Somehow back in August  
I knew it would be  
like this.

Standing here in the kitchen  
like an umbrella that won't  
open, looking over the tops

of the other houses around  
me & slowly becoming  
the fastest man

alive.

Taking Notes Toward  
the Obvious

My room must want to hate  
me as I sit alone  
with one lamp, a forty watt  
bulb handcuffed to its  
own shadow.  
Night sits on the window  
ledge, hunched on all fours  
like a toad.  
The walls giving off an odor  
as if someone  
just walked out.  
Darkness  
crawls under the door  
like syrup. No one.  
I rise & walk to the window.  
The window is painted  
black.  
I begin to chip away  
at the first layer.  
Still black.  
Returning to my desk I

break the silence with a typewriter.

A world appears.

Another one.

Soon, people I've never seen before  
are walking around my room.

A fat woman hobbles

by.

She eyes me.

She looks like she was raped

with a two-by-four.

One man is whistling.

He has lost

his dog. I bend down  
closer & he asks me  
have you seen my dog?

No I say. No I  
haven't before he  
fades.

Room Full of  
Strangers

One man is turning a  
girl over  
with his moustache.  
But that comes later.

Freud was right.  
It all begins with sex.  
They all  
love me.  
They all want to read  
my soup labels  
before deciding who goes first.  
I can see them now.  
Brushing my tail out into  
deep woods & sniffing through  
every stocking in  
my room.  
Peeking under every dress  
in my closet before their  
fingernails collapse  
& I walk in to call  
this whole thing  
off.

Wakened

Now. Birds are beginning  
to peck away in the  
hollow pockets

of my eyelids.

Fog lifts from the  
window

like an arm from  
the top of a bar  
as morning starts

its work from scratch.

And you, you by the  
bedpost, you're coming  
closer.

Pieces

- to e

When we pull ourselves together love  
and are living on the edge of the  
world surrounded by the benign  
indifference of goat-shit  
& goats, say to me some sun  
drunken morning that we, after  
so many back-scratching days  
of cold beds & private  
failures, like a worn but  
perfect puzzle still  
fit.

For Once, Then,  
Nothing

It has been raining for four  
days now. The clouds have  
become the color of a child's  
dirty wad of glue pasted on  
the horizon, on my clothes  
my mangy skin.

My roommate flicks the AM/FM  
and leaves for work.

I try to write & write

nothing. My mind becomes  
a Sunday school flannel board  
in which the figures of Jesus &

The Shepherds keep falling  
continually off. Then,  
plasmodic voices descend on the

front lawn tucking in their  
parachutes for another jump,  
asking among themselves

will he keep going.